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ABSTRACT

Studies of relative levels of psychological distress among Mexican Americans and non-Hispanic Whites have found mixed results, possibly due to cultural differences within Mexican American samples which may confound potential ethnic differences. The hypothesis that differences in psychological distress between Mexican Americans and non-Hispanic Whites would be explainable by cultural variables (acculturation, years of residence in the United States) and social psychological variables (social integration, strain, social support, social conflict) was tested in a household probability sample of Mexican Americans born in Mexico (N=706), Mexican Americans born in the United States (N=538), and nonhispanic whites born in the United States (N=1,149). Interviews with respondents revealed that Mexican-American natives had the highest distress scores, followed by Mexican-American immigrants and then by non-Hispanic Whites Distress was regressed on the cultural and social psychological variables in each of the three groups. Financial strain was significantly associated with increased distress, and marital support with decreased distress, in all three groups. Although high financial strain and low marital support appeared to contribute to the ethnic difference in distress, the ethnic effect was still significant when these variables were controlled. Low social conflict in Mexican-American immigrants, possibly combined with selective immigration and differences in social comparisons, appeared to contribute to this group's advantage over Mexican-American natives. (Six pages of references, 1 data table, and 25 data bar graphs are included.) (Author/NB)

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Cultural and Social Predictors of Psychological Distress in Mexican Americans

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Santa Monica, CA

The Epidemiologic Catchment Area Program is a series of five epidemiologic research studies performed by independent research teams in collaboration with staff of the Division of Biometry and Epidemiology (DBE) of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). The NIMH principal collaborators are Darrel A. Regier, Ben Z. Locke, and Jack D. Burke, Jr.; the NIMH Project Officer is Carl A. Taube. The Prinicipal Investigators and Co-Investigators from the five sites are: Yale University, U01 MH 34224 -- Jerome K. Myers, Myrna M. Weissman, and Gary Tischler; Johns Hopkins University, U01 MH 33870 -- Morton Kramer, Ernest Gruenberg, and Sam Shapiro; Washington University, St. Louis, U01 MH 33883 -- Lee N. Robins, John Helzer, and Jack Croughan; Duke University, U01 MH 35386 -- Dan Blazer and Linda George; University of California, Los Angeles, U01 MH 35865 -- Richard Hough, Marvin Karno, Javier Escobar, and Audrey Burnam.

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A B S T R A C T

We hypothesized that differences in psychological distress between Mexican Americans and nonhispanic whites would be explainable by cultural variables (acculturation, years of residence in the United States) and social psychological variables (social integration, strain, social support, social conflict). We tested this hypothesis in a household probability sample of Mexican Americans born in Mexico (N = 706), Mexican Americans born in the U. S. (N = 538), and nonhispanic whites born in the U. S. (N = 1149). Mexican-American natives had the highest distress scores, followed by Mexican-American immigrants and then by nonhispanic whites. Distress was regressed on the cultural and social psychological variables in each of the three groups. Financial strain was significantly associated with increased distress, and marital support with decreased distress, in all three groups. Although high financial strain and low marital support appeared to contribute to the ethnic difference in distress, the ethnic effect was still significant when these variables were controlled. Low social conflict in Mexican-American immigrants, possibly combined with selective immigration and differences in social comparisons, appeared to contribute to this group's advantage over Mexican-American natives.

Studies of relative levels of psychological distress among Mexican Americans and nonhispanic whites have found mixed results (Antunes, Gordon, Gaitz, & Scott, 1974; Burnam, Timbers, & Hough, 1984; Frerichs, Aneshensel, & Clark, 1981; Gaitz & Scott, 1974; Mirowsky & Ross, 1980; Roberts, 1980; Vega, Warheit, Buhl-Auth, & Meinhardt, 1984).

One possible reason for this inconsistency is that cultural differences within Mexican-American samples may confound potential ethnic differences.

Research on the associations of acculturation and immigration with mental health among Mexican Americans shows mixed results (Burnam et al., 1984; Burnam, Hough, Karno, Escobar, & Telles, 1987; Griffith, 1983; Lang, Munoz, Bernal, & Sorenson, 1982; Ortiz & Arce, 1984; Vega, Kolody, Valle, & Hough, 1986; Vega, Warheit, & Meinhardt, 1984; Vega, Warheit, & Palacio, 1985; Warheit, Vega, Auth, & Meinhardt, 1985), but prior studies (with the exception of Burnam et al., 1987) confounded these two predictors. Prior studies also did not control for social psychological variables that are generally associated with distress.

Strain is associated with distress in general populations (Gersten, Langner, Eisenberg, & Simcha-Fagen, 1977; Makosky, 1982; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) and there is evidence that Mexican Americans experience more strain than nonhispanic whites (Wheaton, 1982).

Social integration, or the existence of social relationships, is associated with low distress in general populations (Kaplan, Roberts, Camacho, & Coyne, 1987; Lindenthal

& Myers, 1979; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Thoits, 1983). Among Mexican Americans, evidence about the association of marital status with distress is mixed (Frerichs et al., 1981; Roberts & Roberts, 1982; Warheit et al., 1985), but the employed consistently report less distress (Frerichs et al., 1981; Roberts & Roberts, 1982; Ross, Mirowsky, & Ulbrich, 1983). Mexican Americans are more likely to be married and less likely to be employed than nonhispanic whites (Roberts & Roberts, 1982; Vega et al., 1984; Vega, Kolody, Hough, & Figueroa, 1986)

Social support is associated with low distress in general populations (Aneshensel & Stone, 1982; Billings & Moos, 1982; Pearlin et al., 1981; Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981; Warheit, 1979). Despite speculation that Mexican-American culture is characterized by high family support, little research has addressed social support among Mexican Americans (Vega & Kolody, 1985).

Social conflict is associated with distress among nonhispanic whites (Abbey, Abramis, & Caplan, 1985; Billings, Cronkite, & Moos, 1983; Fiore, Becker, & Coppel, 1983; Henderson, Byrne, & Duncan-Jones, 1981; Rook, 1984).

METHOD

Respondents: Randomly selected household residents in East and West Los Angeles (Eaton et al., 1984; Hough et al., 1983; Regier et al., 1984):

706 Mexican Americans born in Mexico

538 Mexican Americans born in the U. S.

1149 nonhispanic whites born in the U. S.

Measures:

Cultural differences: 26-item acculturation scale dichotomized at each group's median (Burnam, Telles, Karno, Hough, & Escobar, in press); years in U. S. (for immigrants; $\leq$ 3 years versus > 3 years)

Strain: Pearlin (Pearlin et al. 1981) financial strain and employment strain scales; household strain

Social Integration: marital and employment status; # friends; # relatives not at home; % of friends in area; % of relatives in area; confidant.

Social Support: Dimensions of Social Support scale (Schaefer et al., 1981) re: spouse, friends, relatives, supervisor, coworkers.

Social Conflict: feeling "upset, irritated, or angry" with spouse, friends, relatives, supervisor, coworkers

Psychological Distress: Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977)

Demographic variables: gender; job status (Nam-Powers occupational status score); income.

Procedure: Respondents were interviewed in their homes.

RESULTS

Ethnic and Immigrant Status Differences in Distress and its Predictors (see Figure 1)

Mexican Americans (regardless of immigrant status) were younger, were less likely to be employed, had fewer friends, had a larger percentage of their relatives in the area, had more household strain, and had less marital support than nonhispanic whites.

Immigrants were more likely to be married, less likely to have a confidant, had less social support at work, and less irritability toward all sources than either native group.

Income, job status, and friends' support increased, and financial strain decreased, from Mexican-American immigrants, to native Mexican Americans, to nonhispanic whites.

Distress as a Function of Ethnicity, Immigration, Cultural Variables, and Social Psychological Variables (see Table 1)

Mexican Americans report more distress than nonhispanic whites, and natives report more distress than immigrants.

Controlling for ethnicity and immigration status, recent immigrants and the less acculturated report more distress. Immigration status is not significant, but has a low tolerance.

When demographic variables and social psychological variables are controlled, cultural variables are no longer significant.

Associations of Cultural and Social Psychological Variables With Distress Among Mexican-American Immigrants, Mexican-American Natives, and Nonhispanic Whites (see Table 2)

Mexican-American Immigrants

Acculturation is unrelated to distress in this group. Recent immigration is associated with high distress levels, until social integration is controlled (hierarchical model not shown).

Respondents with more friends or relatives tend to report less distress. Financial strain is associated with high distress. Marital support is associated with low distress. Conflict with supervisor and friends is associated with high distress.

Mexican-American Natives

Above-average acculturation is associated with low distress, even when all other variables are controlled.

Married respondents tend to report less distress than the unmarried. Financial strain and household strain are associated with high distress, and marital support with low distress. Conflict with friends and relatives is related to high distress.

Nonhispanic White Natives

Low income is associated with high distress. The married, the employed, those with many friends, and those with many relatives, report low distress. Financial strain, household strain, and employment strain are associated with high distress. Marital support is related to low distress. Conflict with supervisor or coworkers and toward spouse is associated with high distress.

DISCUSSION

Mexican Americans reported more distress than nonhispanic whites. High financial strain and low marital support among Mexican Americans may contribute to this ethnic difference. However, the ethnic difference remains when these variables are controlled, suggesting that variables not measured in the present study, such as ethnic discrimination, may account for part of the ethnic difference.

Mexican-American natives were more distressed than Mexican-American immigrants. One possible explanation for this difference is selective migration: less-distressed people may be more likely to go to the U. S. Another possible explanation is relative deprivation (Crosby, 1982; see also Parker & Kleiner, 1966): immigrants may be less distressed because of comparing themselves to persons still in Mexico, whereas natives may be more likely to use nonhispanic whites as a comparison group and thus experience themselves as disadvantaged.

Acculturation was associated with distress among natives, but not among immigrants. Less acculturated natives may experience particularly frustrating limitations of economic and cultural opportunity because of barriers involving language and customs.

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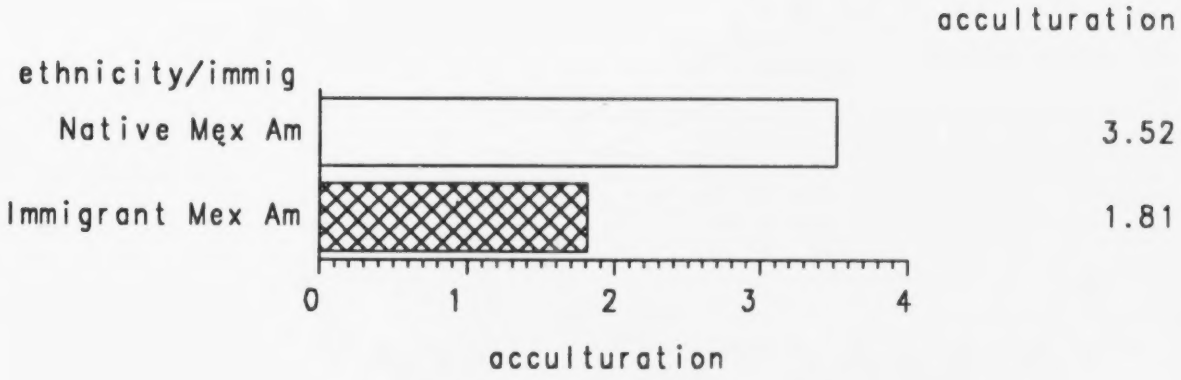
Table 1. Distress as a Function of Social Psychological Variables

	Nonhsipanic Whites born in U.S. (N = 1088)	Mexican Americans born in U.S. (N = 523)	Mexican Americans born in Mexico (N = 683)
intercept	1.69	3.06	1.87
Cultural Variables			
acculturation		-.25**	.08
years in U. S.			-.15
Demographic Variables			
gender	.03	.18	-.01
income	-.16*	-.06	.01
job status X 10	-.07	-.08	-.17
Social Integration			
married	-.16*	-.20	-.11
employed	-.14*		
confidant	.14		.18*
number of friends and relatives	-.09* -.12*	-.08	-.10*
percent of friends local	-.12	-.08	.06
percent of relatives local	-.04	-.09	-.12
Strain			
financial strain	.24**	.37**	.31**
household strain	.25***	.27**	.08
employment strain	.19*	.03	.07
Social Support			
marital support	-.23**	-.23*	-.33***
employment support	-.01	-.30	-.02
friend support	-.02	-.06*	.03
relatives' support	-.13	-.08	.07
Social Conflict			
irritability - supervisor or coworkers	.31**	.07	.24* .12
irritability - spouse	.22*		
irritability - friends or relatives		2.04*	.26* .10
missing data	-.00	-.03	
R^2	.17***	.21***	.15***

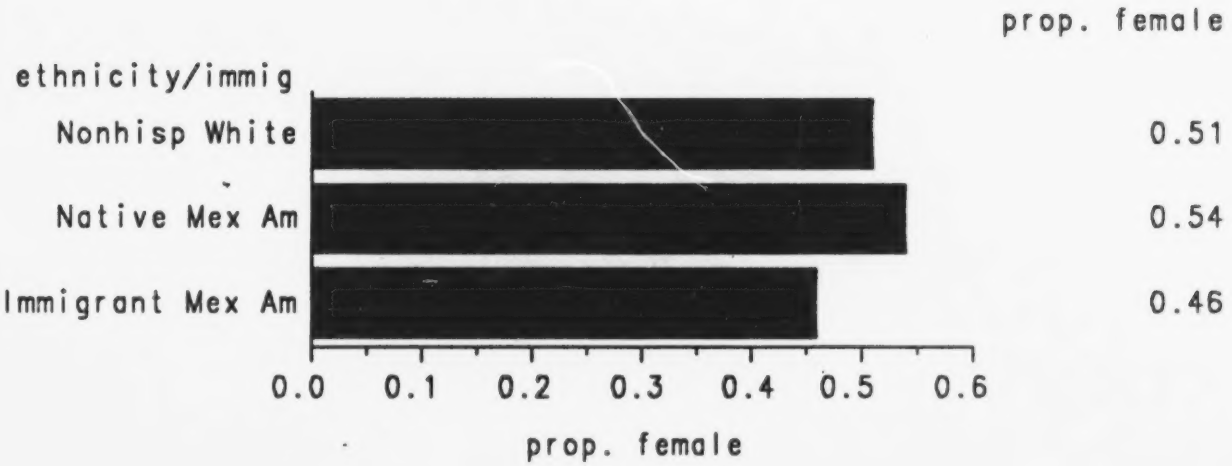
* $p<.05$

Acculturation



Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Proportion Female



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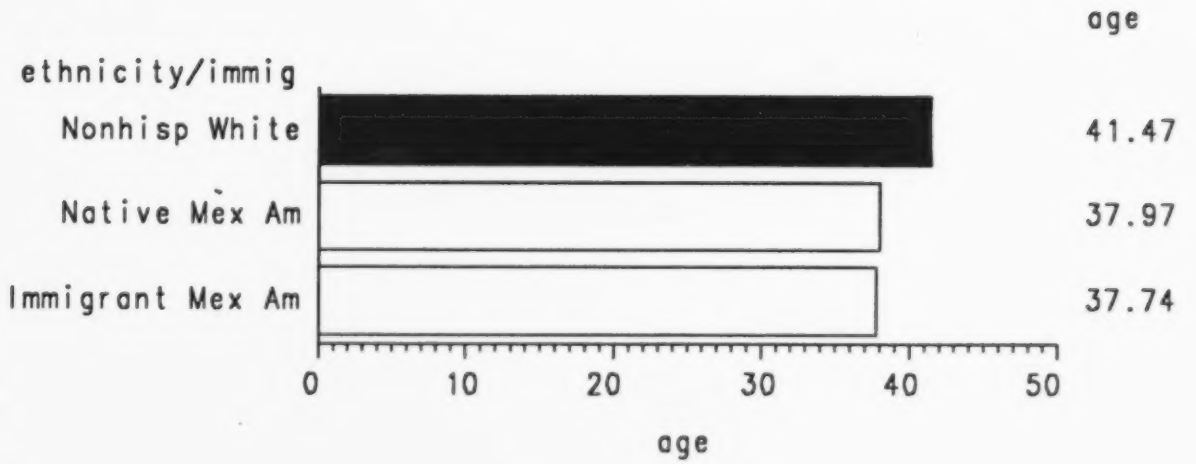
Age



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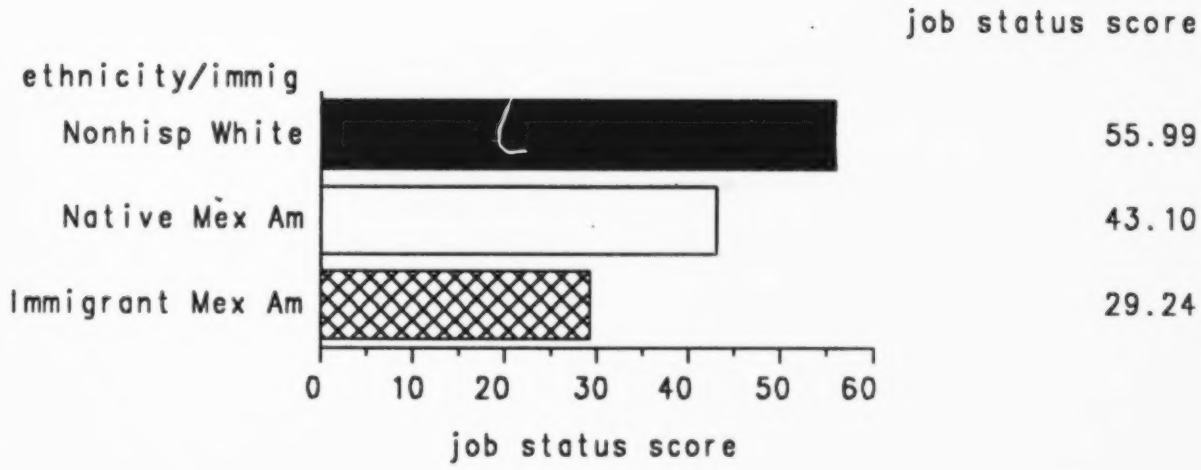
Job Status (Nam-Powers score)



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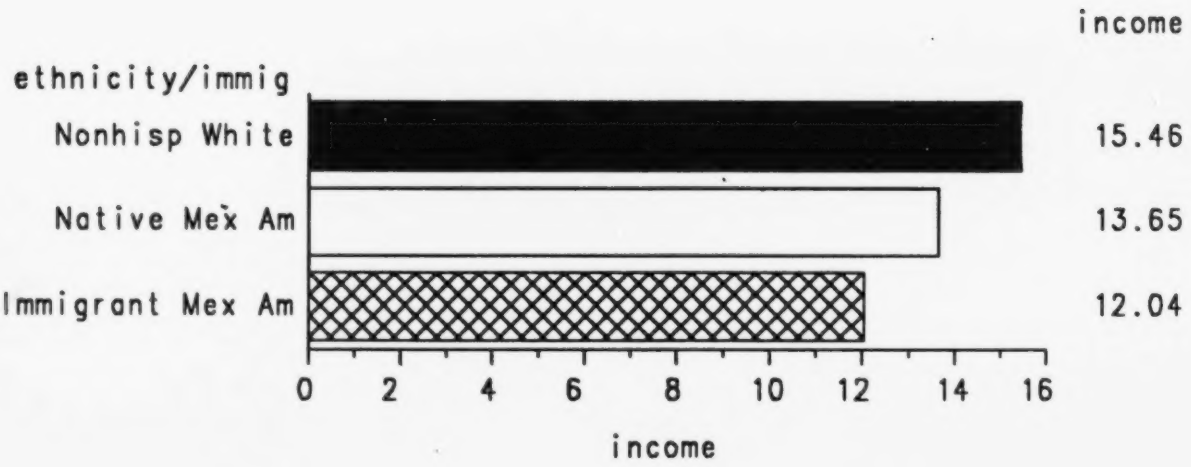
Income



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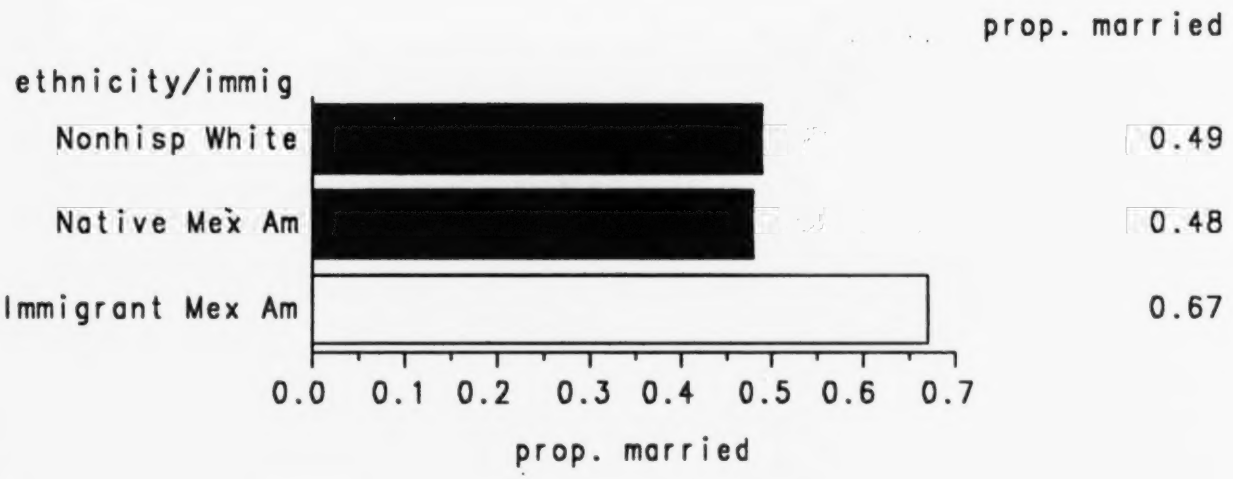
Proportion Married



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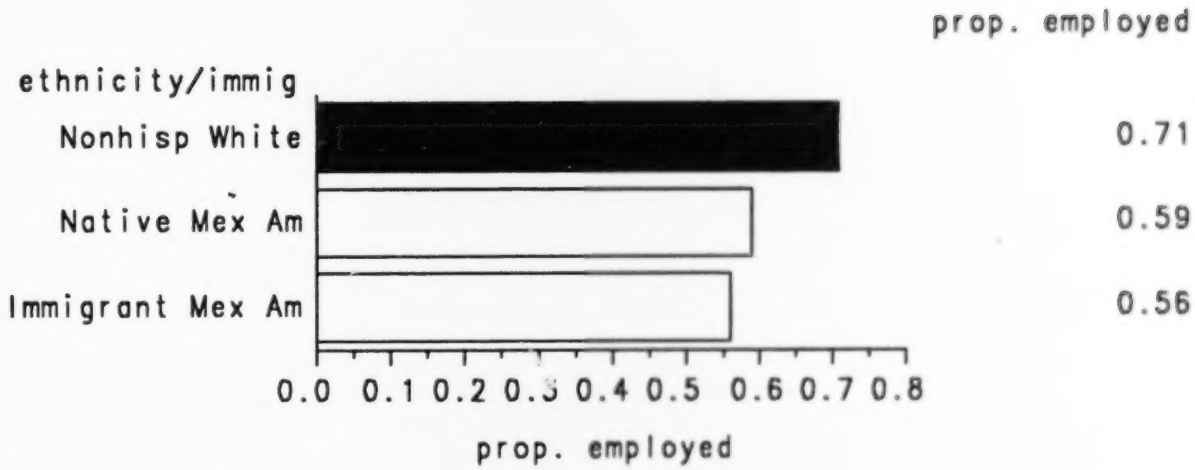
Proportion Employed



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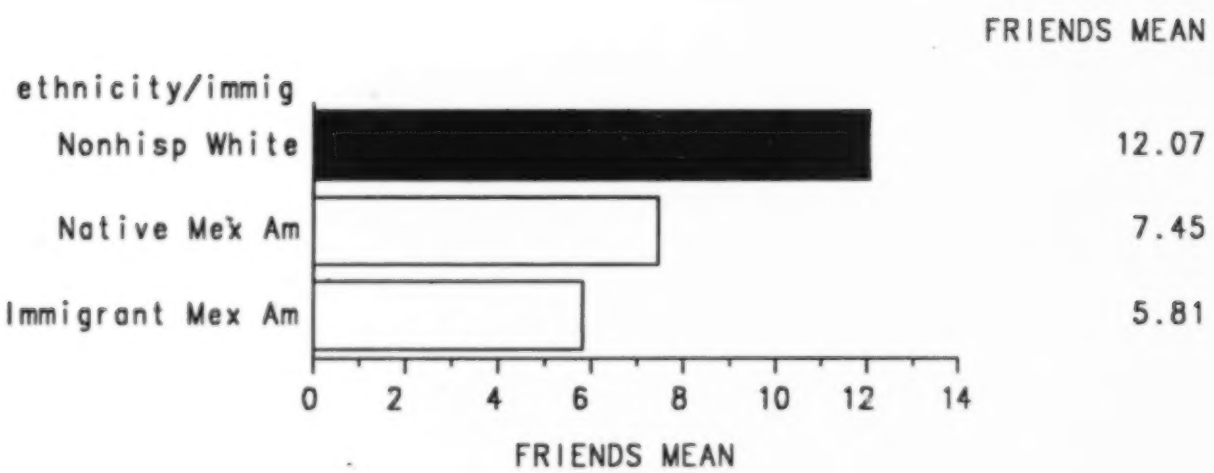
Number of Friends



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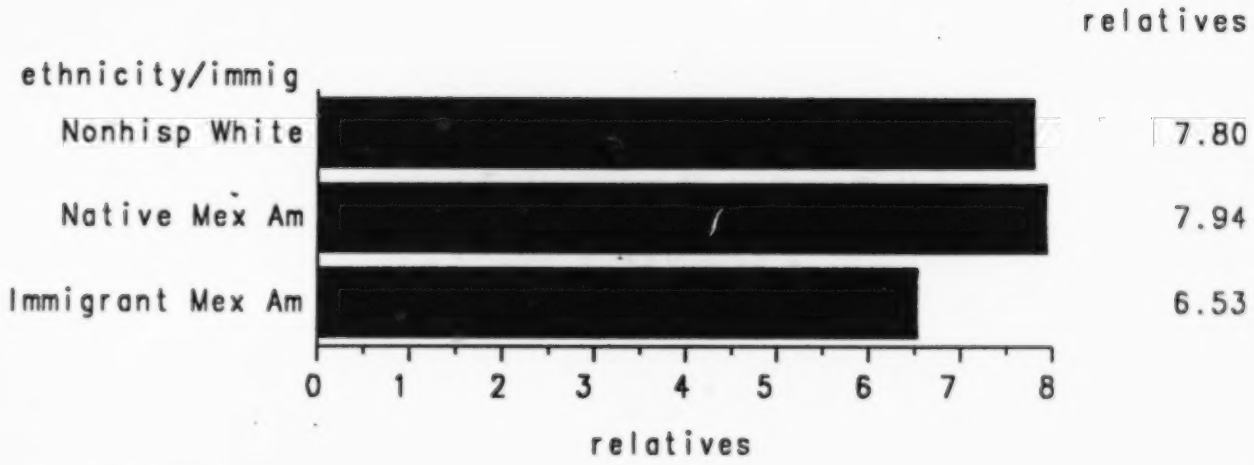
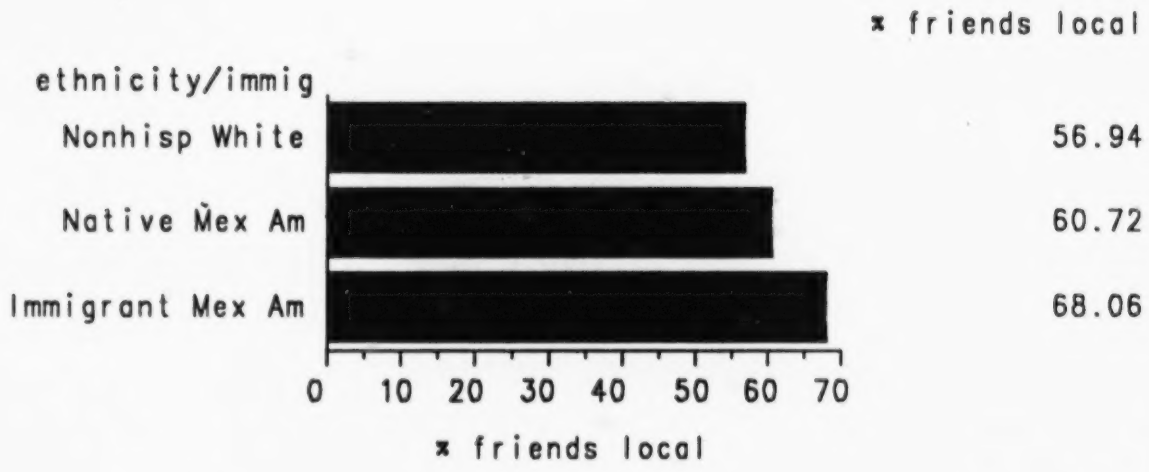
Number of Relatives



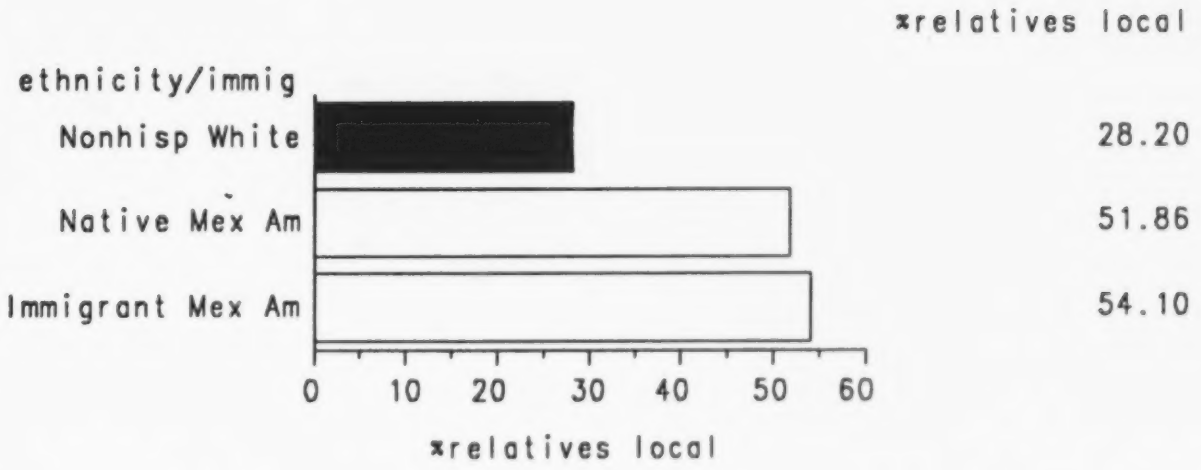
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Percent of Friends in Area



Nonhispanic whites differed significantly from Mexican-American immigrants. Mexican-American natives differed from neither of the otter two groups.

Percent of Relatives in Area



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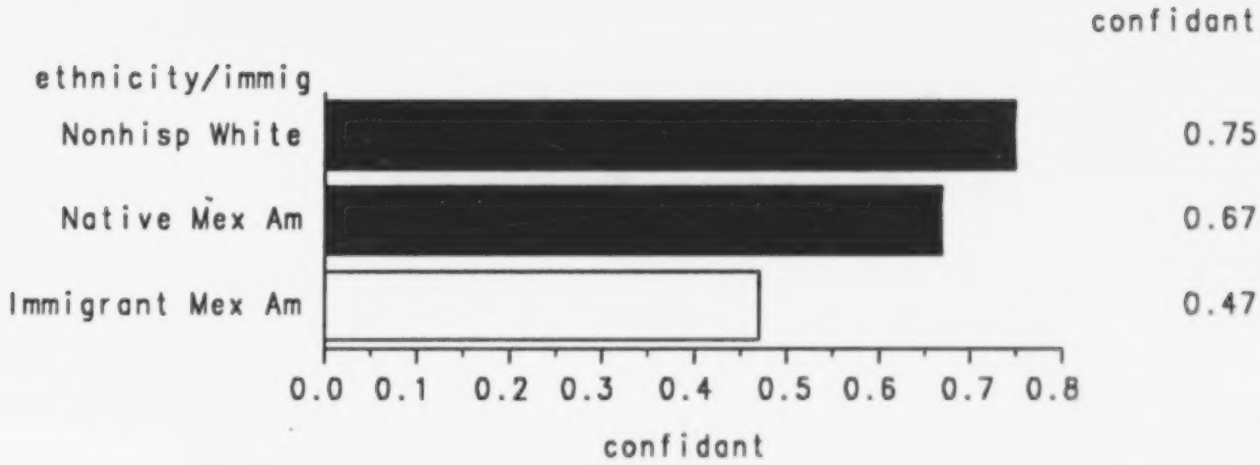
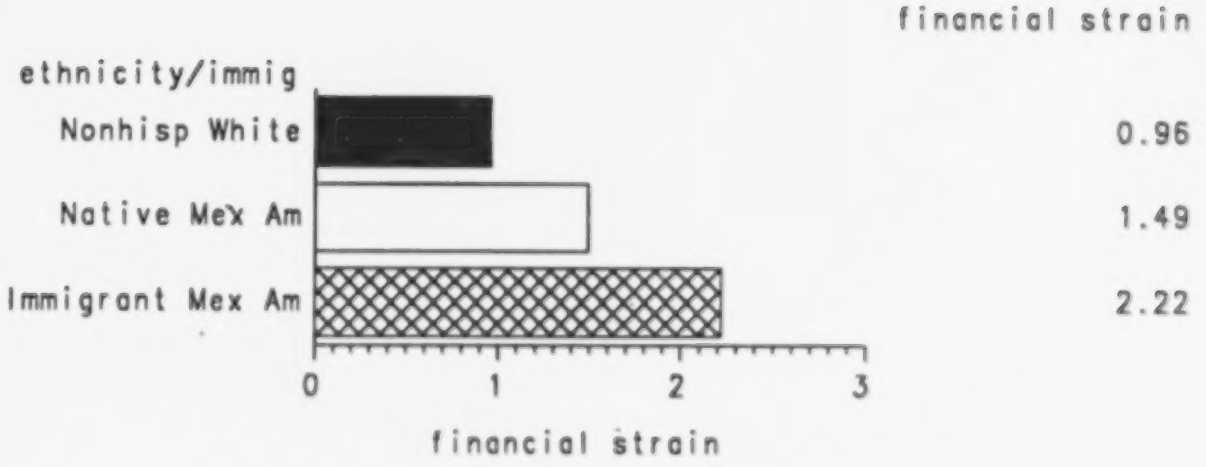
Proportion With Confidant



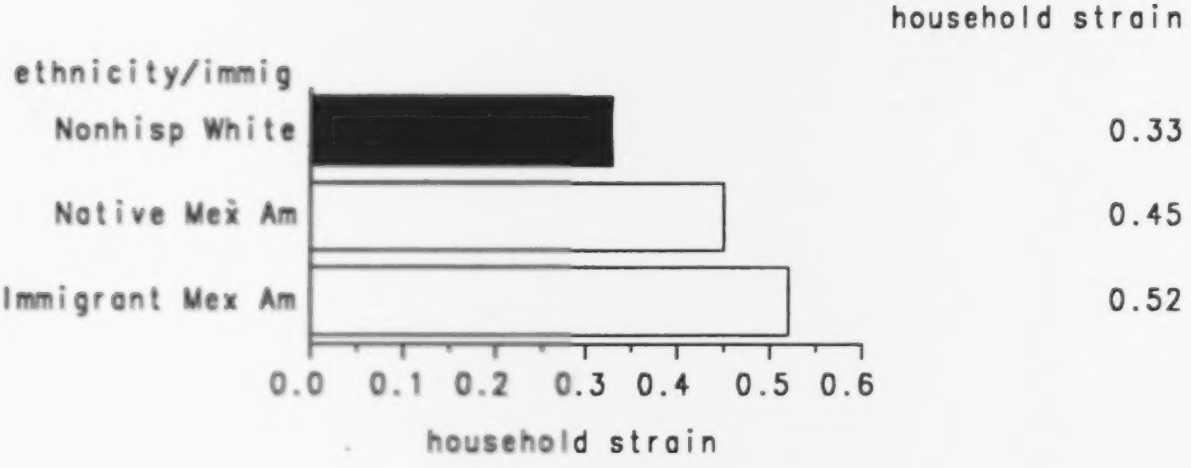
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Financial Strain



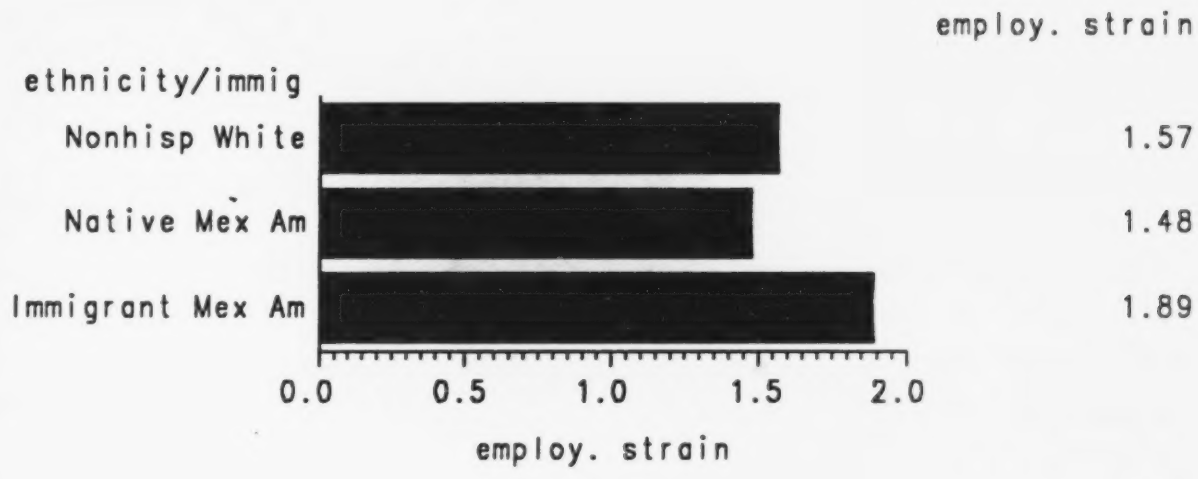
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Household Strain



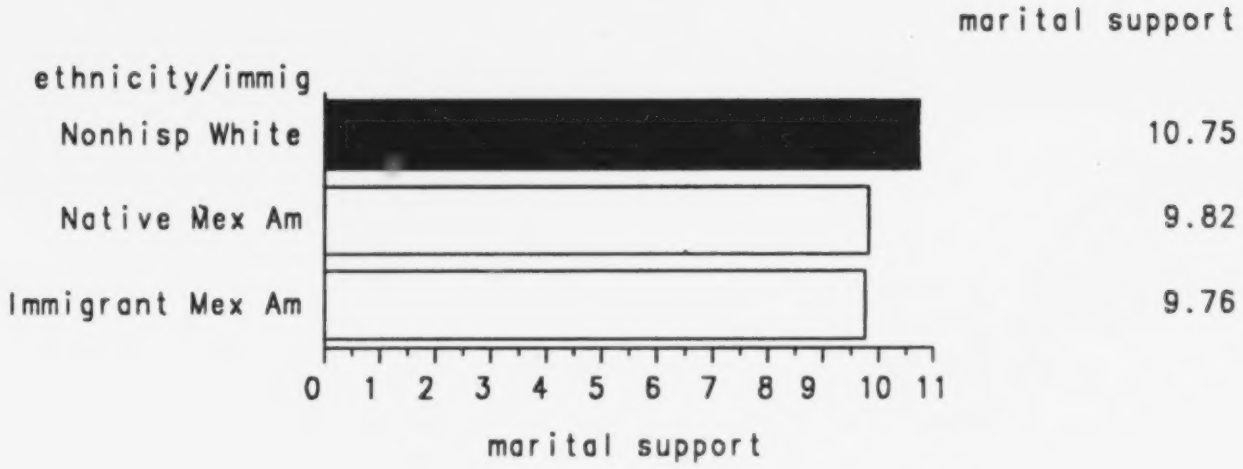
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Employment Strain



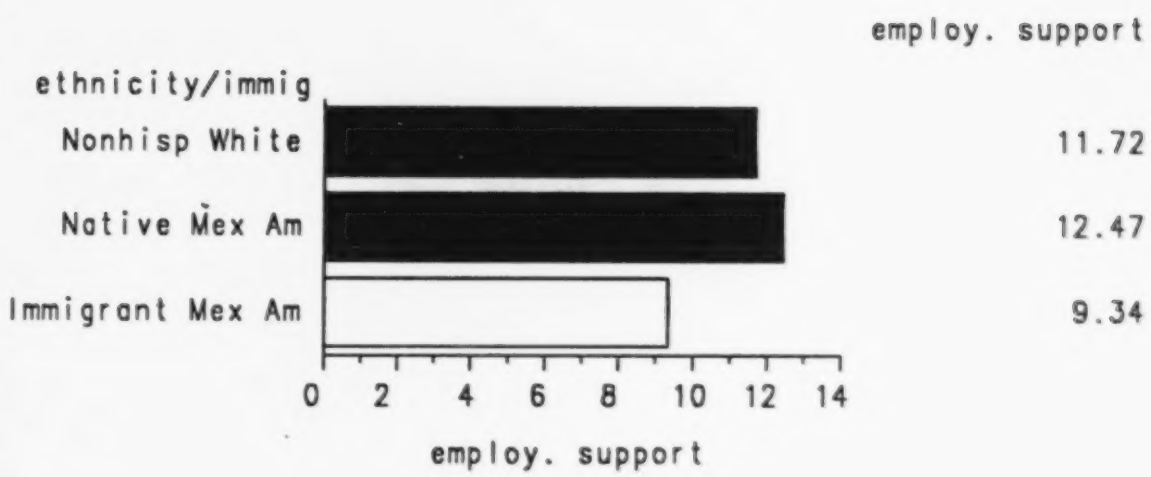
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Marital Support



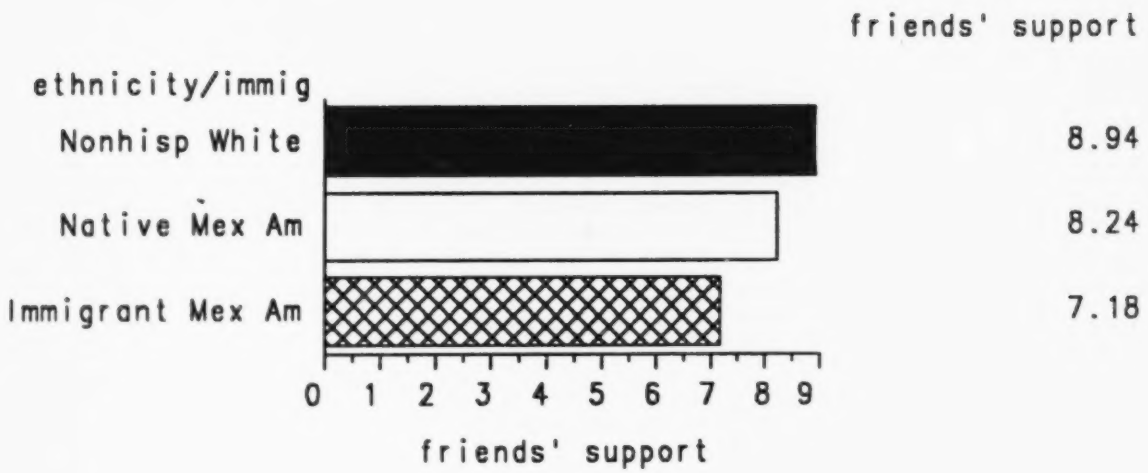
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Employment Support



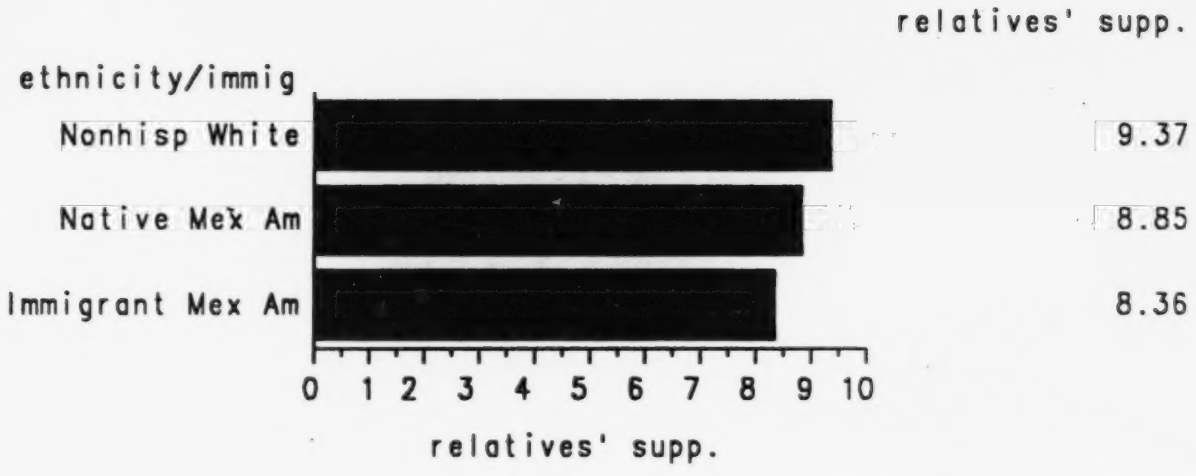
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Friends' Support



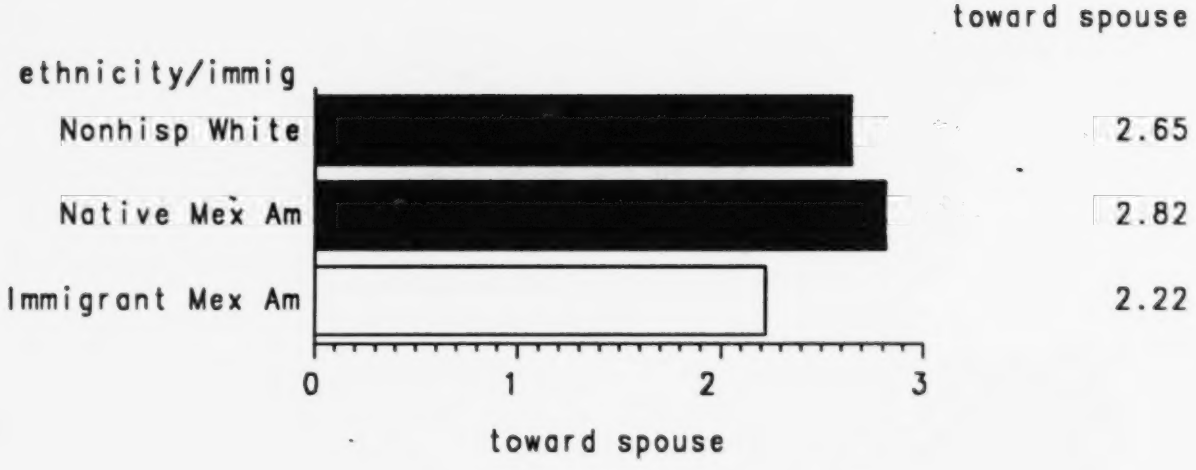
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Relatives' Support



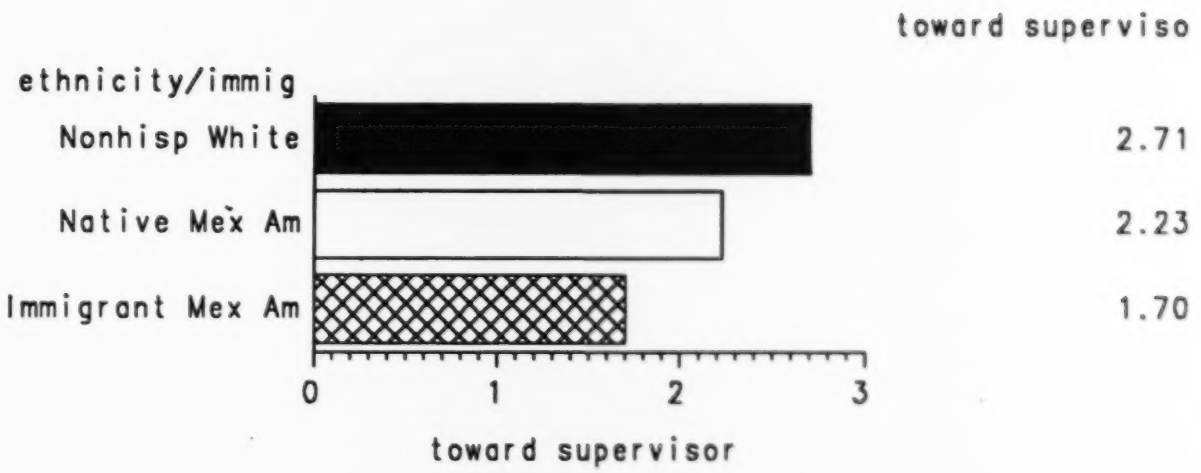
Nonhispanic whites differed significantly from Mexican-Aerican immigrants. Mexican-American natives differed from neither of the oter two groups.

Irritability Toward Spouse



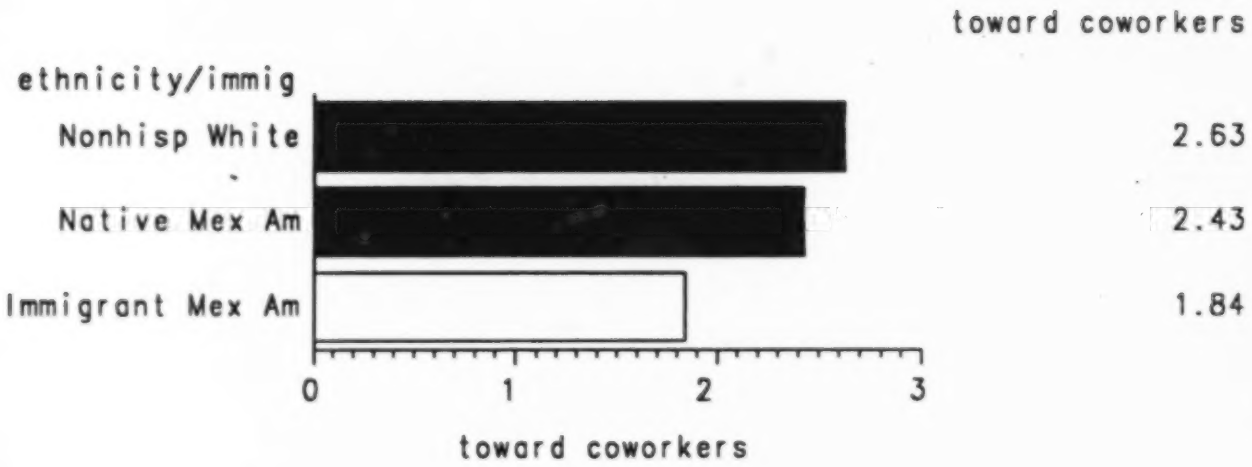
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Irritability Toward Supervisor



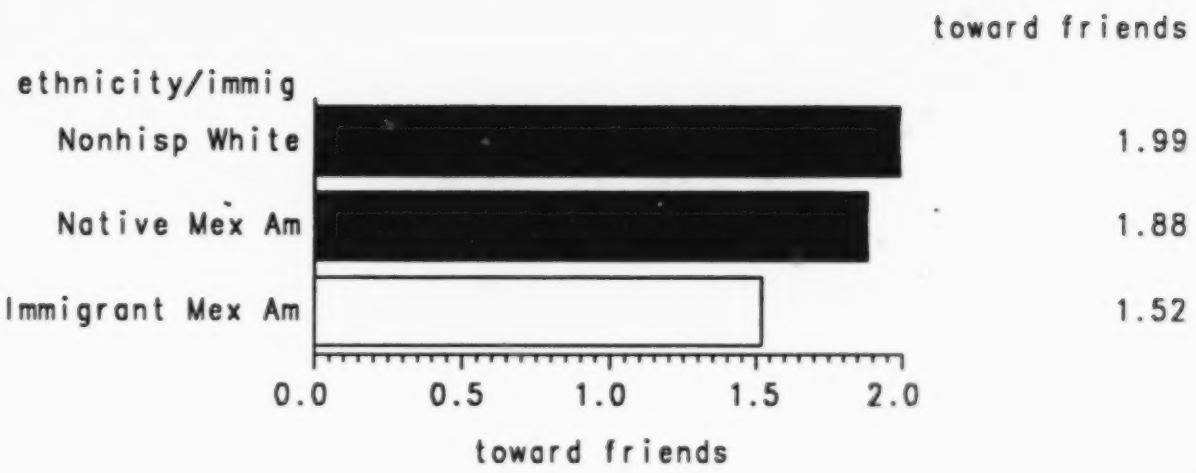
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Irritability Toward Coworkers



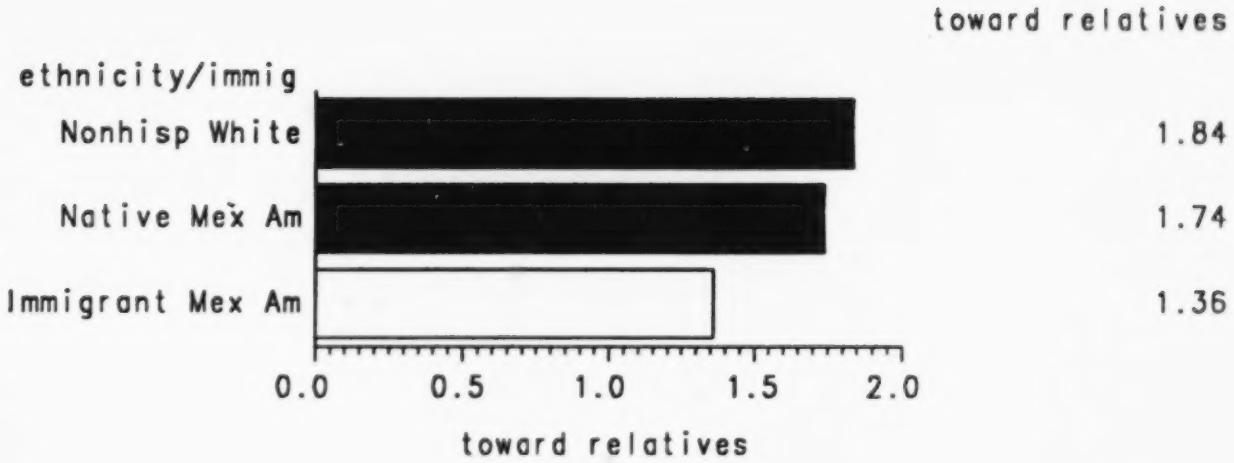
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Irritability Toward Friends



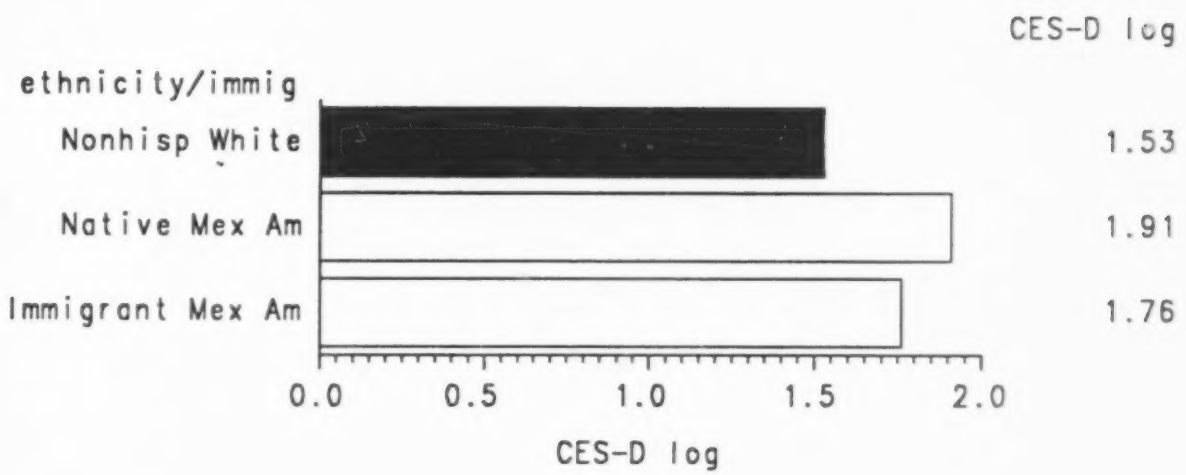
Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Irritability Toward Relatives



Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other

Psychological Distress
log of CES-D score



Bars of the same pattern represent groups that do not differ significantly from each other